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If Congress Pulls the Latin Plug . . .

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras—Although the effort to terminate "covert" American aid to anti-Sandinista guerrillas in neighboring Nicaragua is stalled for now, it has cost the "contras" no momentum and raised excruciating questions for the future.

Uncertain about continuing U.S. support, logistical supply lines slowed to a crawl two months ago. "The debate in Congress put a dead spot in the pipeline," an official intimately involved in the *contras'* anti-Sandinista insurgency told us.

That revealed how significant a player American ambivalence has become in the harsh, thickly forested guerrilla country across the long, undefended Honduran-Nicaraguan border. The unannounced plan of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) had been the overthrow of the Sandinistas by September—at the latest. Despite the surprising successes of the FDN's claimed 10,000 insurgents now operating in small units deep in Sandinista territory, that goal was forced back by congressional liberals trying to end the covert aid program altogether.

The FDN's overall military commander, rotating between the field and a safe house here, has devised a strategy that counts on a short war. "We do not think about a long war," Emilio Echeverie told us. "We will win this war, between September and December."

But if Congress vetoes U.S. assistance, covert or otherwise, what then? "Our momentum is excellent today," said Echeverie, a highly impressive former

military engineer. "A cutoff would hurt us but it would not be devastating." One reason: Echeverie's insurgents have already captured 2,500 weapons, including mortars, in their attacks on Sandinista military units.

In fact, however, a congressional veto switching Reagan administration policy might cripple the FDN. That's because a 180-degree switch would have dramatic political impact in Nicaragua—particularly in Managua, the Sandinista stronghold that must turn against the Sandinistas if the FDN insurgency is to succeed. The outpouring of anti-Sandinista emotion in Nicaragua since the FDN took the field would be bitterly affected if the U.S. forsook the guerrillas.

The fiction that the objective of the FDN was ever anything less than the overthrow of the Sandinistas serves diplomacy and, back in the United States, congressional politics. Their objective was never simply cutting the arms flow to Marxist rebels in El Salvador. That was clearly understood—but not advertised—by the Reagan administration when the CIA first sought congressional approval to finance its clandestine help to the *contras*.

Actually, one cause of delay in the Reagan administration's moves against the Sandinistas was its initial selection of Eden Pastora as the natural future leader of a post-Sandinista Nicaragua. Pastora is the celebrated "Commander Zero" who accused the Sandinistas of betraying their revolution and fled to exile. Pastora now has his own anti-Sandinista guerril-

las in the extreme Nicaraguan south along the Costa Rican border.

As an original anti-Somoza leader, Pastora was viewed in Washington to be politically safer with American liberals as the chief guerrilla leader—and potentially as heir apparent in Managua. While he was "pure," a small percentage of the FDN's forces had been involved with Somoza's National Guard.

The dispute over Pastora was finally resolved in favor of the FDN, but the delay frustrated its leadership. If the U.S. objective had ever been limited to cutting arms supplies to El Salvador, the dispute would never have occurred.

That raises the question of future intentions of Congress as the real significance of the operation seeps under sensitive liberal skins. But the question may not be as fateful as it once seemed. If Echeverie's guerrillas can administer the *coup de grace* to the Sandinistas between September and December, President Reagan would easily carry the United States with him in defending his anti-Sandinista policy from liberal attackers claiming they had not been told the whole truth. One diplomat here dismissed that potential trouble as "a problem we would love to have."

But if the Sandinistas stop the insurgents and Congress then cuts U.S. aid, the blow would be "devastating," whatever Echeverie says today. It would devastate the FDN, and it would supply more evidence to American allies everywhere that a pledge of U.S. support is worthless.

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